

Cooperation Nets Results in New York Transportation

FAIRPORT, N.Y. — Since 1992 New York schools have been faced with funding formulas that left many of them looking for ways to save money. Before the state Legislature took away up to 90 percent reimbursement of districts' allowable transportation costs, the systems ran with few cost controls.

In 1993 the legislature adjusted state support using property wealth formulas, reducing support to wealthier districts and beefing up aid to poorer ones. Some wealthy districts were receiving only 5 percent support and poorer ones 80 percent transportation funding. At the same time the state offered efficiency grants to pay for studies on how to cut costs.

Enter Transportation Advisory Services, one of the leading consultants in the state. According to Christopher Andrews of TAS, the efficiency studies have been developed in several areas:

- Cooperative purchasing, especially of fuel, parts and supplies has been adopted in several regions.
- Route and district consolidation, including sharing costs for out-of-district student transportation, has worked in some areas. Districts have banded together to share maintenance facilities also.
- Sharing with municipalities: using garage facilities, workshops and others.

"Of the 250 schools we've done, probably 150 have been involved in our sharing studies," Andrews said. "I would say more than 1/3 of those are involved in some sort of cooperative purchase bidding. They can go to their vendors and say 'Look, here's what we're seeing on the bid, you have to match this.'"

Andrews said costs have gone down 20 to 30 percent in some cases with the cooperative bidding. The one that works best is cooperative fuel purchasing, with districts buying diesel fuel in bulk.

Savings in Bulk

Andrews' tally of studies for nine regions, comprising 89 schools shows savings of \$863,258 per year and elimination of capital expenditures of \$100,000 for the 92-93 and 93-94 school years. In one case the consultants advised two districts to consolidate maintenance facilities, which avoided one district having to build a new one. "They are probably not spending much less day-to-day, but they avoided the \$200,000 for the facility," Andrews said.

Out-of-district sharing has worked well for eight school districts in the area of special needs transportation. The schools had been transporting special needs, private school and vocational students separately and often across other districts to special schools. The districts combined 75 routes into 29 routes, creating substantial savings in mileage and funds, according to an article in *School Business Affairs* written by Richard Timbs, a superintendent who was involved in an extensive study.

Unions in Way

The biggest obstacle to this type of sharing among school districts is organized labor. "The boards have been going to the bargaining units and saying 'you have got to work with us on this type of thing,'" Andrews said. Unions have been giving ground grudgingly, tying cooperation to pay increases and better

benefit packages, he said.

"Some have found the bargaining units to be reasonable, saying 'okay, this makes sense for us' and others have taken the hard line approach," Andrews said.

Districts are finding ways to cooperate with one another, maintaining driver records in centralized locations, training and certifying drivers together and garaging buses in one another's barns. Some are even sharing repair facilities with local municipalities, fixing snow plows during

the day and school buses at night.

New Era for Routing

Computerized routing is going into a new dimension, according to the consultant. "Routing has typically meant one district routes its buses. We're saying get all the districts together and route them as a group. That is where the big expense and the growing expenses are," he said.

Andrews said Long Island schools have benefited from regional mapping done on sophisticated routing software. "We see a

big future for software vendors in out-of-district consolidations," he said.

Andrews noted that the growth of the 911 telephone emergency code has aided computer routing. The 911 procedure requires that all homes have a number on them, even in rural areas, and plotting them on a map.

With the financial crunch, schools want to play the "what-if game," studying transportation patterns if this or that school is closed via routing software.